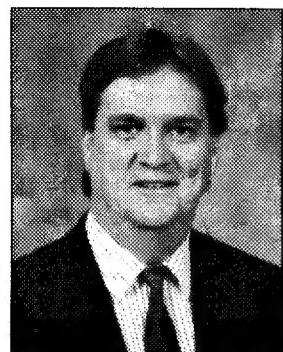


Reading the Web off-line

By Jim Carroll



Jim Carroll is the co-author of the national best-seller, the Canadian Internet Handbook, for which the 1997 edition has just been released, as well as more than eight other books about the Internet including Canadian Money Management Online-Personal Finance on the Net. A native of Byron (now London), he attended St. George's School from 1964 to 1971. He can be reached on the Internet at jcarroll@jacc.com, and has an online site containing many other articles concerning the Internet on the World Wide Web at <http://www.jacc.com>. He welcomes your comments.

Recently I have started to surf the Web without being connected to the Internet—even when I find myself some 10,000 metres above the Rockies in a plane.

What's that, you say? How can you surf the Web without using a modem? Don't you need to be on line to surf the Web?

Not with a new breed of software known as off-line Web readers. These wonderful little programs—which did not even exist a year ago—automatically retrieve for you any Web pages or sites you might be interested in on a regular, scheduled basis, and allow you to view the results off-line.

In my own case, I have been using a program called Freeloader, a product made available at no charge by Individual Inc.—you can download it at <http://www.freeloader.net>. Once you have installed the program, you can tell it which Web sites you want to “free-load”—that is, which ones you want to download so you can read them off-line.

Let's say you visit the Environment Canada Web site each day (<http://www.on.doe.ca/text/ontario.html>) to obtain the short and long-range Ontario weather forecast. With Freeloader, you simply click a button to tell the program to download the site once a day. You then configure Freeloader to dial out every night—in my own case, at midnight. The next morning you can access the weather forecast from your Web browser without ever going on line.

“So what?” you might say—why not just sign onto the Web and visit that Web page?

Because browsing the Web page off-line dramatically changes the speed at which you might browse a particular Web page. Rather than browsing on line and waiting for page after page to be retrieved through your modem, you can browse an entire site in seconds since the Web pages you are viewing now are stored on your hard disk.

In my own case, ever since I have been running Freeloader, my PC has gone out faithfully each night while I am sleeping, and retrieves about 20 news-oriented Web

sites—everything from CNN, *USA Today*, the *Halifax Daily News*, *Simba Media Daily*, *Dilbert*, David Letterman's *Top 10 List*, *PC Week* and *Interactive Age Daily*. All of them are Web sites which are updated on a daily basis. The program dials my Internet provider automatically and then faithfully obtains the appropriate new pages from these Web sites and downloads them to my PC—graphics, sound files, images and all.

Then, when I come into the office in the

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morning, I can browse through the news or information that has been retrieved within a matter of minutes—rather than having to suffer the inevitable waiting that occurs from browsing them on line. Result? Since the Web pages are stored on my PC, browsing the Web has become a blazingly fast experience. And if I am about to fly somewhere to do a speech about the Internet, I simply take the Web sites with me on my laptop.

Using an off-line Web browser like Freeloader means I now find myself accessing a lot more information on the Web than I had before—simply because browsing a particular site no longer takes any time. And so the concept of reading the Web off-line has dramatically changed the Internet for me—Freeloader has become my own little personal information agent, scurrying about at midnight every night, retrieving the particular information I am interested in from the World Wide Web.

Not only that, but I find a program like Freeloader opens up capabilities of the Internet I might not have used before. Even though I have

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an ISDN connection to the Internet, I do not take in many movie clips on the Internet. Often, they simply take too long to download. Yet if the CNN News site I download daily contains a movie clip, Freeloader downloads it while I am sleeping. This means when I look at the movie clip in the morning, there is no waiting time—I click on the movie and it begins playing immediately.

I have also started to get into instant "freeloads". I might be visiting a particular Web site that seems quite interesting. Rather than browsing it right now and waiting for individual pages to appear, I simply instruct Freeloader to download the site immediately. After waiting for Freeloader to finish—while I go off to work on something else—I can then browse the rest of the site off-line, which ends up saving me a lot of time.

There are some challenges with such software, of course, particularly when it comes to instructing Freeloader how much information it should obtain from a Web site. One night before going to bed, out of curiosity, I instructed Freeloader to download Yahoo!, the online index of Web sites. Freeloader does what it is told—and when I came into the office at 6 a.m., it was still carefully working away, downloading page after page of this massive online directory!

The key to using an off-line Web reader like Freeloader is you can instruct

the program how many levels it should access on a particular Web site. If you specify "0", it will obtain but a single Web page. If you specify "1", it will grab that Web page plus any Web pages below. And so if you ask to retrieve more than two levels, you might find you are simply asking the off-line reader to obtain too much information.

I would definitely recommend that anyone using the Web look into an off-line reader—there are many wonderful programs like Freeloader appearing. I would suggest, in addition to Freeloader, that you take a look at SmartBookmarks (<http://www.firstfloor.com>), WebWhacker (<http://www.ffg.com/whacker.html>), Surfbot (<http://www.surflogic.com>) and WebEx (<http://www.travsoft.com>).

The real impact of off-line Web readers? I think they will dramatically change your perception of the Internet. Back in 1993 when Mosaic first arrived on the scene, as I explored the depths of the World Wide Web for many days and weeks, I remember thinking, "This is amazing." Using an off-line reader will give you the same rush of excitement—you will simply find so much more of the Web seems accessible, given the speed by which you browse your favourite Web sites off-line.

Off-line Web browsers—definitely recommended!

The Net's a revolution...

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On the other hand, one can take the optimistic view. This is a period of change—not an end but a new beginning. Teachers, journalists and other information professionals have a real opportunity here to step forward, seize the day and come up with some really powerful and innovative ways of doing that thing they do.

Are they up to it? Is it the best of times or the worst of times? I guess the question really is, do you have faith? 



WebWyth Designs
Heather York-Marshall
<http://www.info.london.on.ca/~hyork/>
hyork@info.london.on.ca
R.R. # 1, Port Stanley, N5L 1J1
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